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SOCIO-CULTURAL MATRIX OF THE BODO WOMEN IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

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Abstract

Naturally the male and female is just biological difference in terms of 'sex', whereas the gender in simply can be referred to the role of a male and female in the society. In contemporary period the rising issues and problems of gender related cases are alarming in the society. From the early civilizations to till date the gender issues has been playing a great role in the society. It is to be noted that the status of the women in the society is the index of the standards of its social organization. Likewise in every human race of society the issues and problems of the gender are inevitable. The Bodo Kachari of Assam living from the very early period in the Brahmaputra valley constitutes the single largest population among the tribes of Assam. They have rich social and cultural traditions. As being the half part of the society for a long woman in the Bodo society has been playing a splendid role in maintaining the social and cultural fabrics of the community. It is undeniable fact that Bodo women in the society held key positions in the field of contributing economy and preserving cultural life and social activities in various ways in the long run in different phases of time. Though the Bodo family follows the patriarchal line the women in the society were not forbidden to enjoy the inheritance rights in the family since the early period. Thus, in this connection this paper attempts to trace and explore the multifarious social and cultural status of the Bodo women in the pre-independence period.

Keywords: Bodo, Women & Status, Socio-Culture

Introduction:

The glory of Indian civilization is witnessed with the existence of the diverse and colourful culture. Some of the basic elements of the culture like the customs, tradition, beliefs etc can be modified depending on the time and situation for the well-being of the society but in the same case it cannot be altered wholly. Women play a key role in the society. Without the honour and dignity of the women in the society, it cannot be perceived its desire goal. Equal empowerment of both men and women only inculcates for prosperity of a nation. Therefore, the women must get equal opportunity to act and develop simultaneously in the society. (Ali Ahmed, 2012: preface).

S.K. Chatterji stated that the Bodos are mainly concentrated over the whole of Brahmaputra valley as far as north and east Bengal forming a solid bloc in North Eastern India (Chatterji, 2007: 45). Sir Edward Gait also stated the Bodos as “aborigines, or earliest known inhabitants, of the Brahmaputra valley. They are identical with the people called Mech in Goalpara and North Bengal. In the Brahmaputra valley the Kacharis call themselves Bodo or bodo fisa (sons of the Bodo). In the North Kachar Hills they call themselves Dimasa, a corruption of Dima fisa or ‘sons of the great river’. They were known to Ahoms as Timisa clearly a corruption of Dimasa, so that this name must have been in use when they were still in the Dhansiri valley” (Gait, 2008: 299). The Bodo society from the ancestral period follows patriarchal line with a few elements of matriarchal characteristics (Bhattacharjya, 2007: 16). In the pre independence period the society was mainly guided by the old customs and traditions. The introduction of Brahma religion among the Bodos by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in the early decades of the twentieth century brought social reformation movement in the society. The status of Bodo women and their role in the society is dynamic and far excelled in various fields in different eras.

Women and religion:

From the religious point of view one may be determined the status of an individual in the society. The social status of an individual was vitally guided and accorded by its rites and rituals. Religious privileges enjoyed by the women in the society throw the light of their position in the society. In the early history the Aryans regarded the woman as untouchable during her occurrence of menstrual cycle. Apart from this period of menstruation the women were not regarded as impure by religion in the Vedic society. In Vedic period the women enjoyed all the religious rights and privileges equally with the male. In the religious rites and ceremonies the presence and co-operation of woman was absolutely essential and it literally increased her religious value in the society (Altekar, 2009: 194-197). By nature the women are more religious and devotional than the men. According to A.S. Altekar, the Hinduism of the present day which is followed by the masses is not the Hinduism of the Srutis and Smritis rather Hinduism of the Puranas where the women were most devoted followers and patrons (Altekar, 2009: 206-207).

Role of Bodo woman in religious activities:

The religion of the Bodos distinctly identified with the type of commonly known as animistic (Endle, 1997: 33). It is undeniable that Endle in his work *The Kacharis* foresightedly elaborated about close intimates with nature by the Bodos. Bodos of Assam living in the Brahmaputra valley inherited the traditional *Bathou* religion from their ancestors. In *Bathou* religion the *Kherai puja* is regarded as the greatest religious festival of the traditional Bodos society. The *Kherai puja* is performed once or twice in a year for the wellbeing of the villagers collectively. Dr. Kameswar Brahma mentioned four kinds of *Kherai puja*: *Darshan Kherai*, *Umrao Kherai*, *Phalo Kherai* and *Noaoni Kherai* (Brahma, 2008: 62-63). The *Kherai puja* is performed to appease the *Bathou Bwrai* and other gods and goddesses, where in the large number of villagers as well as the neighbouring villagers take part.

Bodo woman plays an important role of in different rituals and ceremonies of the traditional *Bathou* religion. In *Kherai puja* the *Doudini* (female shaman) as a key part demonstrates and perform three stages of activities. The first stage is called *Anshranai* or *Alongikhangnai* and in the second stage she falls into the trance and in the third stage she changes into the shamanistic being. The oblations are offered to the different gods and goddesses to appease them. Under the stage of shamanistic the *Doudini* speaks the prophecies in the voice of gods and goddesses then she moves round the *Bathou* dancing with the spiritualistic moods and sprinkles holy water from a pot in her hand. *Doudini* demonstrates as many as eighteen kinds of dances and replicates the nature of gods and goddesses in her dance. The play of *Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute) and *Jotha* (cymbal) also accompany in her dance. During the dance she changes the nature of dance into three stages. First, *Doudini* changes her mood while in dance, secondly, she assimilates her with the gods and goddesses and lastly she replicates the nature of different gods and goddesses. She also performs dance holding with *Thungri* (sword) and *Dahal* (shield) in her hand (Brahma, 2008: 67-68). After the end of the dance the *Doudini* speaks about the prophecies of the people and advice them to live in righteous and virtuous path (Brahma, 2011: 16).

Mainao Tisonnai, the retrieving of goddess of wealth is also another important part of the *Kherai puja* in the *Bathou* religion. *Doudini* plays an important role in that process of rituals. The practice of retrieving *Mainao* is carried on at the conclusion *puja* which regarded as the most essential part of it. On that stage of shaman she sits on the ground invariably with bold mood in front of the *Bathou* altar. On that nature of the *Doudini* the *Oja* affirms that the *Doudini* possessed with the *Mainao*, the goddess of wealth. Usually to satisfy the goddess a pig is sacrificed in front of the *Bathou* altar. In this way the *Doudini* plays the role of endemic in the traditional *Kherai puja* of the *Bathou* religion (Brahma, 2008: 72-74).

Role woman in Social rituals:

In the process of nurturing and delivering of a new born baby the fully experienced village elder women played an important role by co-operating the pregnant lady in the traditional way. There is an influence of faith in the society that the widow or widower and barren woman are not allowed to cut the umbilical cord of new born baby. Besides that in performing it there is proverb that woman's hand regards to be bitter, sour and sweet. They prepare mostly the bitter type of hand on believing that the wound of the cut of cord would dry soon. They also have the belief that the cut of cord by the woman whose hand is believed to be sweet the child may have a long life and become the nature of cheerful person. After all this process the newly born baby is taken to be bathe with the lukewarm water and then the baby is kept on the winnowing fan made of bamboo, covering around with clean and mild dry cloth. Following the custom one of the elder women who performs the rites sprinkles the holy water of the mix of two piece of vilfa stellata, basil leafs and ring of gold to the baby and says:

“Oi Gotho nwngha gwdw mamwn, Bangal na jongal, Garo na Gonggar, harsha na Mepal? Dinwiniprai nwngh Boro jabai”.

The above statement can be translated as ‘Oh child whoever you were, a Muslim, Garo, Gonggar (Bhutia), Harsha (Non-Bodo) or a Mepal (Nepali), from today you have become a Bodo’. (Narzi, 2014: 95-96). The statement deliberately defines the predominant faith of reincarnation of born after the death like as faith in Hindu rites.

Status Bodo Woman in Marriage Tradition:

Marriage is considered one of the important parts of social institution in the society. Marriage determines the destiny of a woman in greater sense. The marriage is an important ceremonial social institution in the Bodo society. Bhaben Narzi, K. Brahma and many other renowned authors supported six types of marriage system namely (i) *Somajni nem-khanti baidiywi kalamnai haba* (According to standard social custom), (ii) *Gwrjiya Lakinai Haba* (Yielding to bride's house), (iii) *Karsonnai Haba* (marriage without consent), (iv) *Dongkha Habnai* (widow marriage) (v) *Bwnanwi Haba Lanai* (Force marriage) and (vi) *Dwnkarnanwi Haba Lanai* (elopement type of marriage) The above four types of marriage are socially most approved among the Bodos (Narzi: 2014, 61). During the pre-independence period, *Hathasuni Haba*, the traditional system of marriage was most preparedly followed by the Bodos before the advent of the Brahma religion.

The Brahma religion believer also retained some elements of traditional marriage system within them with the view of maintaining cultural importance. In the marriage proper as well as in the Brahma marriage the role of the *Bwirathi* along with *Barlangpha* is very significant to stand by the bride. To complete the rituals of marriage ceremony two ladies is being selected by the parents of bride as the service girl and at the same time they must not be from widow. The widow or widower is not allowed to perform

any auspicious task during the marriage ceremony as the Bodos believed and called them *Koro Gojo* (Narzi, 2014: 65).

The influence of Hindu marriage custom, *Asura Vivah* (Altekar, 2009: 39) is observed in the traditional marriage system of the Bodos. In that kind of marriage the husband entailed to pay a reasonable bride price to knot the marriage relationship. In Hindu society the idea of bride price was initiated so that it would not disgrace the girl and her family status and also with the thought that she was not given in marriage for nothing (Altekar, 2009: 39). The realisation of *phon thaka* (Bride price) was very high and was compulsory tradition in the Bodo society. More often it was exceeded more than one thousand rupees before the intervention of Brahma religion among them. After the influence of Brahma religion in the Bodo society and under the initiative of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma the rate has been abridged and fixed at rupees one hundred and five only. Gradually, the system of *Phon Thaka* has been discouraged and it became a nominal one in the present Bodo society. There is no subsisting of dowry system in the society among the Bodos. (Brahma, 2011: 26).

According to the tradition in the Bodo society the young male and female is bound to lead pure lives before the marriage, which uphold the faithful marriage vows in life. In cases where there are many daughters in a family who are unmarried and one of suspected of violating the law of chastity, the following plans for detecting the offender is adopted. To reveal offender whole family gathers around the sacred *Siju* tree (*Euphorbia splendens*) in the evening and at the foot of this venerated tree a quantity of uncooked rice is formally buried and kept it for a night. In the next early morning that rice is carefully unearthed and a certain quantity is given to each matured girl to be chewed. On doing that, the offender under the pressure of fear of detection unable to chew the portion of rice is given to her. Out of disgrace the offender girl is made to disclose the name of her paramour. Accordingly the paramour couple compelled to marry and the victim forthwith had to increase the bride price as compensation to girl's parents for defaming their honour of the family in the society (Endle, 1997: 30)

Inheritance:

After the deceased of her husband the widow becomes the owner of all the properties belonging to her husband. Judging from that point of view few elements of matrilineal link can be illustrated in the Bodo society (Sharma Takur, 2007: 166). The widow may agree to become the wife of a widower following the '*Dhongkha*' or *Dhokaa* system which is socially approved. On premature death of a husband a widow can re-marry and the man lives in the house of a widow as her husband. However, the process is regularized according to the social custom called *Dongkha Habnai* (Brahma, 2009: 67, 101). The man who wants to marry a widow comes to an agreement and as a token he gives a silver coin to her. It is known as *gongkhon honai*. In the event of becoming a '*Dhonkha*' a widower delinks all connections with his original family and comes to live with the widow permanently. In this marriage the man is deprived of his paternal property to

enjoy his wife's property (Brahma, 2011: 23). If however the widower dies after the marriage the widow's property goes neither to him nor to his original family can claim any share of the widow's property. The property goes either to the former husband's close relatives or to his sons (Sharma Thakur, 2007: 166-67)

A widow can remarry any person who is not related to her. If she marries for the second time then she loses the authority on the property of her deceased husband. The male child is always entitled to get the property of his father. Sometimes, it is seen that the widow is allowed to take the female child of her deceased husband along with her to her new husband. Although the widow remarriage is allowed in the Bodo society, there are some restrictions which are followed strictly. Under some unavoidable circumstances the law allows a widower to re-marry his deceased wife's younger sister, but not the elder sister whom he is obliged conventionally to regard in the light of a mother. Similarly, a widow may re-marry her deceased husband's younger brother, but not allowed to re-marry the elder brother of her deceased husband (Brahma, 2009: 101-02).

The custom widow remarriage is prevailed among the Bodo society through the ages. Though the privilege of widow is highly regarded in the Bodo society, without the proper consent of the widow one cannot influence and approach her to remarry. With this connection there is a proverb in Bodo language-

*“No burikou dadangdao,
Hinjao randikou da aedao”* (Narzi, 2014: 81).

Free translation in English:

Keep away from touching the obsolete house,

Stay away from ridiculing the widow.

The divorce is allowed in the Bodo society. There are some formalities of divorce in Bodo society which was described by Endle in his work. Divorce may take place by mutual consent of husband and wife without affecting certain formalities. Both the husband and wife appear before the village elders and give their statements. After concluding the matter in the presence of village elders the divorce ceremony is performed by tearing the betel-leaf into two pieces which is called in Bodo 'Pathoi lai bisinai' or *Pan-chira* in Assamese. This symbolic act indicates that torn leaf can never reunite, so their married life is severed forever. Without any reasonable ground if a husband divorces his wife then he is to bear the responsibility of her livelihood for a certain period. This law equally applied to both husband and wife (Endle, 1997:31).

Woman and Social Organisation:

In the early decades of twentieth century, the wave of Gurudev Kalicharan's social reformation movement through the Brahma religion brought social awareness among the Bodos women to emancipate themselves

equally in the society. The following were social organizations and samities formed with the objectives of social upliftment:

Gram Hiteishi Samity:

This organization was constituted in 1925 under the Parbatjhora estate of Goalpara district. The main objective of the Samity was to development of health, education and economy in the villages (Brahma, 2001: 56). Gurudev from the very beginning was aware of the backwardness of the Bodo villages. With this intention to eradicate the economic disparity The *Gram Hiteishi Samity* was formed with the vision of village economic development. The Samity rendered financial help to the farmers to purchase important agricultural equipments, livestock, seeds etc. further they helped the peasants to fetch their agricultural products at the market at suitable prices. The volunteers of the organization visited villages to educate and equip knowledge on the methods of farming the farmers on agriculture and different seasonal crops (Narzary, 2004: 56).

In order to help the womenfolk the Gram Hiteishi samity encouraged and imparted trainings on weaving to the village women. In addition, it successfully set- up weaving centre in the village of Banyaguri. This became its central office. Harimahan Brahma and Shibnath Marak happened to be its office bearers for the first time. In simple words this Samity under the guidance of Gurudev played the role of co-operative society for the wellbeing of the poor Bodo village farmers (Narzary, 2004: 56).

Mahila samity:

Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma observed that without empowering the women the reformation of the society would be stagnant, and therefore he made up an idea to form women's organization to look after women's welfare and rights. Consequently the Mahila Samiti was established in the Bodo dominated villages and many women became its member. They gathered and took up discussions on different problems faced by the women and tried to find out the definite solution of it (Narzary, 2004: 57-58)

The Mahila Samity also convened annual conference. In this convention the women representatives from different villages attended. This Samity had emphasized the ensuing education to the female child and asked all the Bodo mothers to send their daughters to the school for the greater interest of the society. This Samity also focused on the need and importance of hygiene and cleanliness.

Role of Woman in the Economic Activities:

In a tribal community the contribution of women is not less, they play an integral and important role in society and substantially contribute towards their economy. Through the ages the domain of agriculture has been the backbone of economy as well as occupation of the Bodos of Brahmaputra valley. Paddy cultivation was the main crops of cultivation among them. It is notable fact that the Bodo womenfolk

profusely supported the men in various agricultural activities. They also have the knowledge of cultivating various types of kitchen garden vegetables, which rendered not only for the consumption purpose but also brought some income for daily necessities (A.Brahma, 2011: 33)

Apart from the agricultural activity the animal husbandry is also one of the important sources of their economy. They domesticated cows and buffalos for carrying agricultural activities. Besides that the pigs, goats, fowls were reared for food item as well as for offering religious sacrifices and also for the commercial purposes. The Bodo womenfolk have lots of contribution behind this economic enterprise in sustaining of the family.

The Bodo women also preserved the culture of Bodo society by the activity of weaving cloths. They are expert and self sufficient in producing various kinds of cloths for domestic use. They are expert in portraying different *Agars* or designs on the cloths. They weaved *Dokona*, *gamsa*, *fasra*, *aronai* etc. in various colours and designs. Selling of that item of cloths in the market the Bodo women earned handsome money, which in greater sense it expanded the market place of the Bodos (A. Brahma, 2011: 34).

Sericulture and Handloom:

In the district of Goalpara and the *Eastern Duar*, sericulture was equally maintained as the essential part of cottage industry like the other plain districts of Brahmaputra valley. The people took it as the subsidiary occupation of them during the off-season agricultural activity. There had been found three varieties of silk in Assam. Among them *pat* was the costliest, *endi* was coarser and was generally used by the common people. *Muga* is much stouter, coarser with less glossy than *pat* but more durable to the latter. The people of Goalpara district most commonly reared *eri* worm with the aim of producing silk and for other purposes (D.P. Barooah, 1979: 179). For the wearing apparels the Bodo weave clothes for themselves from the *muga* and *eri* silk. H.K. Barpujari also mentioned the finest artistic skill of Bodo woman in manufacturing *endi* cloths (H.K. Barpujari, 2004: 2004). Generally the clothes woven in the Golpara was inferior in texture to the upper Assam but has more durability in quality. The *eri* cloth had extensive sale demand. For an instance, according to the fineness of its texture a piece of 18 feet length by 4 feet breadth *eri* cloth had the sale value of price from Rs. 6 to Rs. 10 or 12s to £1 (W.W. Hunter, 1982: 54). The Bodo women occupied important place in weaving and the use of homemade garments which also supported in bringing up family income (B.C. Allen, 64-65). They are far excelled in portraying various types of *agars* or design on the cloths. But due to the intervention of the British rule there started dark era in the indigenous industries. This brought tough challenge for the indigenous people of Assam (D.P. Barooah, 1979: 198-200).

Conclusion:

Thus the above discussions throw the light of the rich socio-cultural elements of the Bodo society, in which the role of the women and their participation is undeniable fact. Moreover, the influence of other Aryan Hindu cultures in the society brought some elements of changes in the old traditional social customs of the Bodos. However, out of such kind of threats the Bodos could uphold their socio-cultural tradition till today.

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